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Skin Deep: African American Women and the Building of Beauty Culture in South Carolina

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SKIN DEEP: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE BUILDING OF BEAUTY
CULTURE IN SOUTH CAROLINA

by

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ABSTRACT

“Skin Deep: African American Women and the Building of Beauty Culture in South Carolina,” examines how African American women in the state adapted door-to-door beauty systems into successful businesses between 1900 and 1960. Black beauticians in South Carolina built beauty parlors that would serve as critical community meeting spaces away from the cruelties of Jim Crow segregation, and in some instances became centers of activism. Through sources including memoirs, newspapers, city directories, and the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, I highlight the ways black beauty culture proved black women could be financially independent, beautiful, and politically active.

The thesis consists of two sections. The first is a traditional academic paper that traces beauty culture’s impact on the personal and professional lives of South Carolina’s black women. The second is a plan to explore South Carolina’s beauty culture during Jim Crow in a museum exhibit. This strategy will be presented to the Historic Columbia Foundation to be implemented in its Mann-Simons Site, a house museum that surveys the entrepreneurial lives of African Americans in South Carolina. The exhibit discusses beauty culture in the context of a modern, international skin bleaching industry.

The paper and exhibit plan together draw the conclusion that beauty culture played a key role in combating racism during South Carolina’s Jim Crow segregation by empowering black women to become entrepreneurs, who in turn provided spaces of community shelter and activism.

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SECTION 1

SKIN DEEP: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE BUILDING OF BEAUTY CULTURE IN SOUTH CAROLINA

In 1918, the general manager of Madam C.J. Walker's cosmetic company wrote to a selling agent, instructing her where to focus her marketing efforts: "thoroughly canvass Virginia, North and South Carolina. There are more Negroes and money there than all the states combined."¹ When F.B. Ransom penned the advice, black women in South Carolina had already established themselves as key participants in the national business of hair and skin care for African American women. They lived in the first state to secede from the Union, a state that upheld some of the most rigid Jim Crow laws in the country, and a state in which at least 82 percent of female domestic workers were black in 1920.² Yet despite every barrier to their success, African American women in South Carolina sold door-to-door systems like Madam C.J. Walker's and became entrepreneurs. The period between 1900 and 1960 saw an explosive growth of African American-owned beauty shops throughout the state. This paper traces the rise of those salons. It argues that beauty culture empowered women to move from washtubs to salon chairs, and along the way prove that black women could be financially independent, beautiful, and politically active. Beauty culturists began the century fighting for nontoxic cosmetic products; sixty years later, many of them were facilitating social change out of their parlors.

¹ F. B. Ransom to Mrs. A. C. Barnett, September 10, 1918, MCJWP.

² Midge Wilson and Kathy Russell, *Divided Sisters: Bridging the Gap Between Black Women & White Women*. (New York, NY: Anchor, 1996.), 42.

“Beauty culture,” as African American women decided to call their own field of hair and skin care in the early 1900s, is worth particular study in South Carolina because of the largely unexplored ways it subverted the racial order of Jim Crow in the state. It was seditious to claim that black women could be beautiful in the first place. Beauty was the exclusive right of white women in the antebellum period and beyond, at least in the opinion of white Southerners. Dozens of cosmetic powders cashed in on the trope of the Southern belle in the state’s newspapers,³ and protecting white women’s purity was the alleged motive behind much of whites’ racial violence against African Americans in the post-Reconstruction era.⁴ Yet along came black beauty culturists, instilled with these same notions of inferiority, who built careers upon convincing brown-skinned South Carolinians that they, too, had a stake in beauty. And as Ransom indicated in his 1918 letter by characterizing South Carolina as a prime market for product sales, beauticians in the state were experts at persuading African Americans of their self-worth.

There was also no small amount of anxiety in the state that hair-straightening and skin-lightening products were blurring important racial lines. State laws until 1957 separated the races in nearly every facet of daily life and local customs filled in the rest, with shop owners barring blacks from dressing rooms and lunch counters.⁵ However, segregation only worked when there was a clear visual line between black and white. As beauty culture products grew in popularity, so did the appearance of fretful columns in

³ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 44.

⁴ “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror” (Montgomery, AL: Equal Justice Initiative, 2015), 53.

⁵ Blain Roberts, *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 162.

South Carolina's papers about a "negro-passing problem."⁶ Products that would lighten skin and straighten hair, combined with a legacy of race-mixing that extended back to slavery, could make it feasible for an African American to "pass" as white and cross racial boundaries. Although blacks would have a slim chance of passing in the state's small towns where their identities were well known, even the smallest town papers often warned of "rascals" sneaking onto the white sections of streetcars or "rogues" from out of town who had fooled locals.⁷ The products facilitated enough racial ambiguity to stir panic in a state that leaned on the rigid racial classifications of Jim Crow.

Light skin and straight hair took on connotations of whiteness, but beauty culturists themselves were not encouraging African Americans to pass as white. On the contrary, they argued beauty culture bolstered the early twentieth century movement of racial uplift by providing black women unparalleled financial opportunities. Annie Turnbo Malone, Madam Walker's predecessor and eventual competitor, founded Poro College to train black women in her hair system and become businesswomen.⁸ Booker T. Washington, the linchpin of racial uplift, vilified beauty culture for emulating whiteness. A dramatic scene played out at the 1912 meeting of the National Negro Business League when an ignored and frustrated Madam C.J. Walker stood before Washington and proclaimed, "I have made it possible for many colored women to abandon the washtub for a more pleasant and profitable occupation."⁹ Walker convinced Washington beauty

⁶ *Union Times* (Union), March 20, 1903. The letter to the editor also characterized miscegenation as "the most abominable sin"—a sentiment common throughout the state's newspapers in the early twentieth century.

⁷ *Abbeville Press and Banner* (Abbeville), January 3, 1914; *Herald and News* (Newberry), July 21, 1910.

⁸ Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 25.

⁹ A'Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2001), 13.

culture held value to women—particularly in the South—with otherwise dismal career prospects. Likely persuaded by a combination of Walker’s persistence and his wife’s belief that traditional industrial training proved problematic for women, he finally included beauty culture at his Tuskegee Institute in Alabama before his death.¹⁰

Several historians have drawn attention to the ways beauty products and beauty parlors empowered women. In *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture*, Kathy Peiss argues that the beauty industry did not merely oppress and sexualize women; instead, beauty products presented women with unprecedented social and professional mobility.¹¹ Tiffany M. Gill examines African American women’s activism in the beauty industry in *Beauty Shop Politics* and reveals the power of the salon as a private meeting space for black females.¹² Both books are important to this research, but neither has concentrated on the particular ways beauty culture subverted the racial order in South Carolina. This state produced outspoken beautician-activists and grew thriving black female-owned businesses worth exploration in an era of Jim Crow oppression. South Carolina beauticians’ personal accounts, as well as city records, local newspapers, and the nationally published *Negro Motorist Green Book*, work together to untangle how black women used beauty culture to reshape not only hair, but also their communities and their personal destinies.

For these South Carolinian women, the story begins in the decades after emancipation. With formerly enslaved people free and rapidly building a black middle

¹⁰ Mrs. Booker T. Washington, “What Girls Are Taught and How,” in *Tuskegee and Its People: Their Ideals and Achievements*, ed. Booker T. Washington, (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1905), 68-86.

¹¹ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

¹² Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 25.

class, cosmetic companies recognized a new and profitable market in black women. Suddenly, African Americans had buying power. The beauty industry had long ago learned how to sell lightening powders to white women with the image of the Southern belle; their darker counterparts were a dream market waiting to be tapped. White companies sought to capitalize on social distinctions tied-up in African American hair texture and skin color since enslavement. The clearest way to tell a house slave from a field slave was her appearance, her hair healthier and her skin lighter because she lived free from harsh days outdoors and likely ate a more protein-rich diet to combat hair loss; perhaps white blood also ran in her veins, a trait that could carry valuable social capital.¹³ Whites advertised their skin bleaches in the state's papers with promises to brighten dark-skinned women's fate by lightening their skin to resemble mulatto complexions. Their guarantees were extravagant: Crane and Co. declared in Charleston's *Afro-American Citizen* in 1900 that its "Wonderful Face Bleach" would "gradually turn the skin of a black person five or six shades lighter" (Figure 1.1).¹⁴

At first, white-owned companies staked exclusive ownership of the black beauty market—and the claims they made in advertisements might almost be comical if they weren't so saturated in racialized aesthetic. Crane and Co.'s advertisement in the *Afro-American Citizen* said that its Wonderful Face Bleach functioned as a "black skin remover."¹⁵ Language in these advertisements is important: this product would not create the appearance of white skin, but rather *remove* black skin. The implication through this linguistic choice is that dark skin is a curse, a hindrance to be purged if a woman hopes to

¹³ Roberts, *Pageants*, 60.

¹⁴ Crane and Co., "A Wonderful Face Bleach," *Afro-American Citizen* (Charleston), January 17, 1900. The ad also appeared ten days later in Columbia's *People's Recorder*, 27 January 1900.

¹⁵ Crane and Co., "A Wonderful Face Bleach." For similar dramatic promises to lighten skin, see *Rock Hill Messenger*, January 26, 1900; Magnolia Balm advertisement, *Union Times*, June 2, 1916.

lead a successful life. Before-and-after illustrations like the one in Figure 1.1 were common throughout South Carolina's black newspapers from the 1880s into the earliest part of the 1900s, when white companies held their monopoly on the black beauty market.¹⁶ The advertisements demeaned black features through sketches and language, exploiting the supposition that black women wanted to be white. Their notions proved to be woefully out of touch with black women's desires at the turn of the twentieth century.

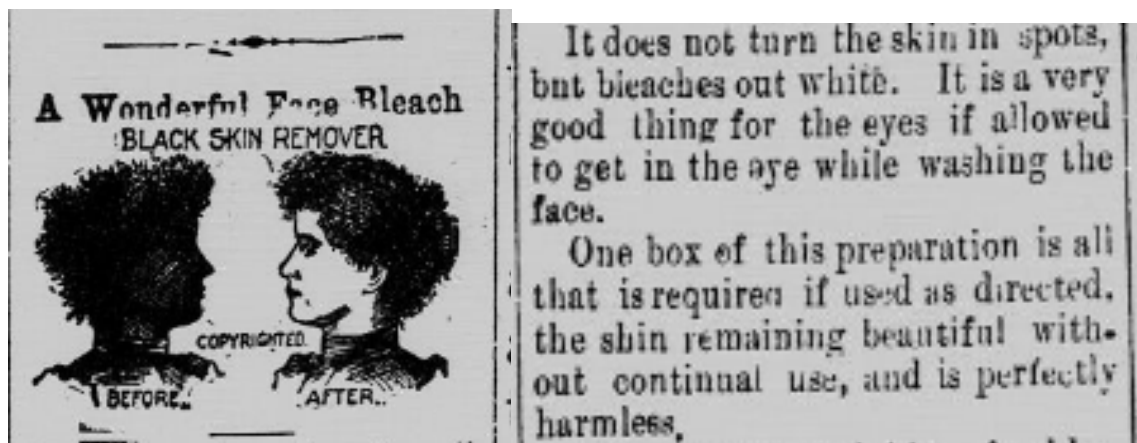


Figure 1.1: The *Afro-American Citizen* (Charleston) advertises a “Black Skin Remover” in January 1900.

Reading further down the copy, the advertisement assures customers that the product will be “packed so that no one can know the contents except the receiver.” Skin bleaching was a secret—and arguably shameful—act, one to be conducted within the privacy of a woman's bedroom.¹⁷ Yet even with careful attention to concealment, it was clear who had used bleaches because they destroyed the face.¹⁸ Many of the formulas contained lead and mercury, ingredients that irreparably harmed black women's skin. Crane and Co. even claimed in this ad that it was “a very good thing for the eyes if

¹⁶ Before-and-after advertisements appear frequently in South Carolina papers in 1900. See also: *People's Recorder* (Columbia), January 27, 1900; *The Rock Hill Messenger*, January 26, 1900.

¹⁷ Roberts, *Pageants*, 84.

¹⁸ Roberts, *Pageants*, 77.

allowed to get in the eye while washing the face.” The bleach caused blindness in several recorded cases. One of those cases was brought to light by African American pharmacist Mrs. J.H.P. Coleman in her address to the National Negro Business League in 1912, the same year Madam C.J. Walker demanded to be heard before the conference. Coleman delineated the horrific side effects of white-manufactured products and asked the assembly to consider why, during demonstrations, white salesmen used gloves to apply their products to black women’s faces.¹⁹

Some in the African American community had begun to suspect that the injury to black women’s faces was more intentional than negligent: that out of their anxiety at seeing blacks gain access to traditionally “white” social and professional opportunities, whites concocted mixtures that would mar the skin to maintain a clear distinction between the races.²⁰ Hartona Face Wash, developed by another white company in Richmond, advertised in Columbia’s *Southern Indicator* in 1901 under a similar promise: a bleaching wash that was “perfectly harmless.”²¹ Analysis by the Journal of American Medicine proved differently; Hartona included a concentration of mercury high enough to be hazardous.²² The white-owned Ozonized Ox Marrow Co. advertised an equally devastating product for hair in the *Rock Hill Messenger* in 1900. The mixture claimed to be “the only safe preparation in the world that makes kinky hair straight”; in reality, the mixture contained alcohol that burned the scalp and pulled hair out in clumps.²³ Whether their manufacturing of damaging products was malicious or just careless, the cosmetic

¹⁹ *Report of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League*, 65, 67.

²⁰ “A Danger to Our Race,” *Half-Century*, November 1921, 14.. Peiss further discusses the *Half-Century* calls for boycotts in *Hope in a Jar*, 211.

²¹ Hartona Face Wash advertisement, *Southern Indicator* (Columbia), January 18, 1901.

²² Gerald A. Spencer, *Cosmetology in the Negro* (New York: Arlain Printing Co., 1944), 46.

²³ Ozonized Ox Marrow advertisement, *Rock Hill Messenger*, January 26, 1900.

companies had capitalized on dark-skinned women's hopes for success with impossible guarantees.²⁴

Black women's fight in the beauty industry, then, grew from a human desire for products that would not permanently scar their bodies. Around 1900, 'buyer beware' warnings written by women cropped up in black newspapers in South Carolina. *Half-Century*, a popular African American magazine, ran a letter from a Virginia woman who wanted to alert readers of the unscrupulous practices of a cosmetic company in her town—Crane and Co., the same company that made the Black Skin Remover. "If I live a hundred years, I will never put any powder on my face that is made by white people. I feel confident that no colored person would knowingly make a preparation that would injure our women's skin."²⁵ In the same publication, a Georgia woman wrote that a friend used a bleach made by a white company in Memphis that made her skin peel off in strips. *Half-Century* had a considerable readership among the South Carolina's black middle class.²⁶ The letter-writing initiated by black women marked the beginning of change not just in how these products were made, but who made them.

The sting of the products and the equally venomous way they were advertised motivated black women to become entrepreneurs in this new market of goods aimed specifically at their race. African American women were actually quite prepared to participate in the beauty market. They had passed around folk remedies for dry scalps and tanned skin for over a century. Charleston Poro agent Mamie Fields recalled from her youth the "official hair wrapper" in every Southern town, and the tactile pleasures of

²⁴ For similar dramatic promises to lighten skin, see *Rock Hill Messenger*, January 26, 1900; Magnolia Balm advertisement, *Union Times*, June 2, 1916.

²⁵ *Half-Century* February 1910, 8.

²⁶ On southern readership of black national newspapers and magazines, see Paul Edwards, *Southern Urban Negro as a Consumer*, 169-84.

working with hair, the diversion of visiting and chatting.²⁷ Annie Malone's and Madam C.J. Walker's natural formulas emerged as alternatives to the hazardous products whites were manufacturing, but they also reclaimed for African American women a tradition of pride and camaraderie in hair work. Malone and Walker's entry into the marketplace moved advertising copy away from explicitly racist beauty norms to the voice of a sister offering an opportunity for professional livelihood.²⁸ Madam C.J. Walker's advertisement for her "Wonderful Hair Grower" in Columbia's *People's Recorder* in 1910 still used the before-and-after convention of earlier white companies, but traded the racialized caricatures for a real woman: herself (Figure 1.2). It was an appropriate trade, since Walker's story so closely mirrored the lives of the South Carolinian women who purchased her products. Walker grew up poor, married young, and worked long hours as a washerwoman. She managed to save enough to become a student of Annie Malone's Poro system—and in a split that would cause animosity between the two, started her own line of products and began training women in the Walker method of beauty culture. Her own hair growth with the use of her product became her best testament.²⁹

Walker's system was so effective that it gathered a devoted following among South Carolinian women. Women in the state wrote their thanks to the Walker Company in religious idioms, praying for blessings upon her company. Ministers' wives, as trusted leaders of African American female circles in the early twentieth century, were often the ones to introduce beauty culture to South Carolina's communities. In February 1913, the *Southern Indicator* in Columbia announced that Madam C.J. Walker would be coming to

²⁷ Mamie Garvin Fields and Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 1983), 189-190.

²⁸ Nowile Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 42-50.

²⁹ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 88.

town. Scores of women showed up at the Reverend R.W. Baylor's house where she was staying, combs and towels in hand to learn to press hair from the "hair miracle-worker."³⁰ Similarly, Poro distributed materials to agents in South Carolina that gave instructions to "spread the gospel of better personal appearance."³¹ Women wrapped their dreams and prayers in the products, believing beauty culture would provide the path to self-confidence and true independence.



Figure 1.2: Madam C.J. Walker pictures the effects of her "Wonderful Hair Grower" in the *People's Recorder* (Columbia), 1910.

Tentative footsteps into the industry soon swelled to a march: a battalion of women who knocked door-to-door with hair and skin care. Most systems offered upwardly mobile paths similar to today's direct sales companies: women paid for training in the method and a starting inventory of products, and from there could choose to make house calls to work on hair, or to start salons out of their own kitchens. With diligent

³⁰ "Madam C. J. Walker in City," *Southern Indicator* (Columbia), February 15, 1913. References to Walker's products as miraculous are rife in letters from customers to Walker's company: in a letter Lillie Byrd wrote to Madam C. J. Walker from 20 May 1918, Byrd quoted 1 Cor. 11-15: "If a woman have long hair, it is a Glory to her."

³¹ "Welcome into the PORO Organization!" cited in Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 93.

work, the organizations promised, a woman could build a full-fledged business with agents employed beneath her. After 1915, nearly every advertisement for hair preparations in South Carolina contained an “Agents Wanted Everywhere” call within its text. In the *Union Times*, Star Hair Grower guaranteed “good money” and announced in 1917 that it wanted one thousand agents to be found “in every city and village.”³² In Columbia, Madam Beckwith spent the summer of 1921 training thirteen agents in her system. After learning the advantages of her hair grower and her lightening face powder, their home addresses were neatly printed in the *Southern Indicator*.³³ For these women, becoming an agent represented an attractive alternative to the drudgery of labor. Low wages and little fulfillment awaited them in the field or in the factory. Even worse, African American women who donned maid’s uniforms and headed into white homes risked violence at the hands of their employers. Bernice Robinson of Charleston became an agent partly because of her mother’s cautionary tales growing up: “What was in her [mother’s] mind was that if you do domestic work and the white man comes home and he wants to have sex with you, you can’t do anything about it. You have to give in...She wasn’t going to have that with her girls.”³⁴

Women flocked to beauty culture careers because they offered direct, concrete returns. Southern black domestic workers earned only one or two dollars per week—the equivalent of about eighteen dollars now; in 1918, an agent for the Walker Company claimed a woman could “easily make from three to five dollars a day,” or about fifty

³² Star Hair Grower advertisement, *Union Times*, January 5, 1917.

³³ Beckwith’s “Refinol” advertisement, *Southern Indicator* (Columbia), September 3, 1921.

³⁴ Bernice Robinson, quoted in Eliot Wigginton, *Refuse to Stand Silently By*, 182. For a discussion of the sexual threats black women faced in domestic work, see McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*.

dollars today.³⁵ Starting a career in beauty culture did not require much education, only training in the method a woman wanted to practice. One advertisement in the *Southern Indicator* in 1921 declared a starter kit of Madam C.J. Walker's system would cost an interested agent twenty-five dollars. Completing the treatment course itself by mail or personal instruction would grant her a diploma from Lelia College of Hair Culture and "a passport to prosperity"—the ability to use the Walker system on neighbors' hair going door to door or setting up her kitchen salon at home.³⁶ Although the Walker Company stressed the availability of opportunity to *all* women, twenty-five dollars was still quite a substantial start-up sum in 1921—comparable to three hundred dollars today.

The considerable price tag of starting an at-home salon explains why many middle class women joined beauty culture careers alongside those wishing to escape domestic jobs. The teachers, professionals, and educated homemakers who pursued beauty culture planted seeds of activism in the industry that would later blossom in the Civil Rights era. Middle class black women aligned the mission of beauty culture with the racial uplift goals of their club work. Ladies' community involvement through clubs became crucial in the first decades of the twentieth century as African American men were increasingly cut off from the body politic in the South.³⁷ Many clubwomen believed beauty culture served the race well by providing a practical path for African Americans to better their financial situation. Annie Malone's Poro Company explicitly paired its beautifying mission with uplifting the race in its South Carolina advertisements, touting:

³⁵ Agent quoted in A'Lelia Bundles, "Madam C.J. Walker: Cosmetics Tycoon," *Ms. Magazine*, July 1983, 93.

³⁶ Walker System advertisement, *Southern Indicator*, August 13, 1921. Similar advertisements for agents appear in national papers: see the Poro College advertisement in the *Chicago Defender*, August 1915.

³⁷ Roberts, *Pageants*, 177.

“Be a Poro Agent. Be an active force for GOOD.”³⁸ Plenty of women in the state answered the call: in newspapers, the names printed in membership columns of local clubs frequently reappear in lists of local agents.³⁹

Becoming a beauty culturist was about more than financial rewards. Flexible work as an agent afforded women more time for their club work; unmonitored by white employers, they could affect change in their communities without fear of backlash. Mamie Garvin Fields’ work in Charleston demonstrates how the powerful alliance between beauty culture and club participation operated within the context of racial uplift. Historians have frequently focused on Fields’ club involvement, but overlooked her employment with Poro—perhaps an irony, since the two were intricately linked. Fields herself attributed her club work and beauty work to the same sense of obligation to her race and her aspiration to be a modern woman.⁴⁰ Working as a beautician gave Fields the social momentum to start the Modern Priscilla Club. It also gave her the flexibility to sit as a two-term president of the Federation of Women’s Clubs, which would eventually become affiliated with the National Association of Colored Women. Beauty culture even found its way into her lessons to children on James Island. Mamie Fields believed it her duty to teach her Gullah students not just to read and write, but also to represent their race well. One day in 1926, armed with her Poro kit, she sat the girls in her class down one by one and dressed their hair. Much to her chagrin, some mothers waited for her at the schoolhouse the following morning, furious with Fields for compromising Geechee

³⁸ Poro System advertisement, *People’s Recorder* (Columbia), June 10, 1917.

³⁹ *Southern Indicator* (Columbia), April 4, 1919.

⁴⁰ Fields, *Lemon Swamp*, 192.

values with her middle class hairdressing.⁴¹ For the Sea Island Geechee who lived in relative isolation from mainland society, Fields' beauty culture was an affront to the traditional African hair styling in which they took pride.

However, there is evidence to suggest that other rural communities in South Carolina embraced beauty culture by marrying it with traditional hair care. F.B. Ransom's correspondence with Walker agents indicates that sharecroppers sent in sizeable sums of money for hair growers, which they would use to obtain long, smooth locks to then be wrapped or braided. Mostly, these women wanted the health benefits of products' natural ingredients that would counteract the damage of long days in the harsh Southern weather. They used skin bleaches not to lighten their entire complexion, but as spot treatments to even their skin tone from sun damage.⁴² Women in the backcountry were also eager to participate as beauty culturists themselves, if they could eke out enough money from washing clothes, selling eggs, or cooking meals to mail order the starter kit and training.⁴³

In both the country and the city, in the working and the middle classes, beauty culture released remarkable entrepreneurial energy among women accustomed to suppressing their ambitions.⁴⁴ By 1920 black beauticians outnumbered white beauticians in South Carolina and every Southern state.⁴⁵ Columbia's city directories from 1917 to 1927 chronicle the mass movement of black women into the beauty industry. The directory's "Colored" pages list the names of black men and women, their occupations,

⁴¹ Fields, *Lemon Swamp*, 111.

⁴² Spencer, *Cosmetology in the Negro*, 46. According to Spencer, most women used bleaches just for spot toning skin.

⁴³ F. B. Ransom to Mrs. A. C. Barnett, September 10, 1918, Walker Mfg. Co. General Correspondence, MCJWP.

⁴⁴ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 91.

⁴⁵ Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census, 1920*, vol. 3 and 4.

and their home addresses. The 1917 directory presents dozens of women described as “dom” (domestics), “laund” (laundresses), “smstrs” (seamstresses), cooks, or maids, all expected professions of African American women during Jim Crow. Yet in that year, one name stands out from the rest: Pauline Green, the single female barber among a sea of many colored male barbers. She had opened shop at 1208 Washington Street, an act exceptional in itself because most beauty parlors remained at-home businesses until the 1930s.

By 1922, more women dipped their toes in beauty culture and sent ripples through the long list of domestic workers in city directories. Among the many maids and cooks are also women listed as “barber,” “agt” (agent), and “slsmn” (salesman). In 1927, there were so many colored “Beauty Parlors” listed in Columbia that they received their own category separate from “Barbers.” Beauticians distinguished their services from those of barbers with a now-specialized hot comb pressing process, as well as the sale of cosmetic skin products out of some of their salons. Other women had joined Pauline Green on Washington Street, and still more had begun businesses out of their homes.⁴⁶

Tracking the careers of agents listed in Madam Beckwith’s 1921 *Southern Indicator* advertisement also illuminates tiny cracks in the Jim Crow social order (Figure 1.3). Julia White, listed as “Tolsey” White in the Beckwith advertisement, was a domestic worker in the 1917 Columbia City Directory. But Madam Beckwith’s instruction in Columbia the summer of 1921 must have had an impact on her vocation; although she retained her listing as a domestic in 1922, in the 1927 directory she had earned the title of “slsmn.” Presumably, in those five years Tolsey had built enough

⁴⁶ *Columbia City Directories*. Columbia: Walsh Directory Co., 1917, 1922, 1927.

capital to leave domestic work behind and sell Beckwith products full-time. Katherine Perry, another of the listed agents for Beckwith, registered her house at the same address as her place of business in 1922, pointing to the at-home nature of most neighborhood salons in the first half of the century—a conflation of home and work space that Tiffany Gill characterizes as particularly Southern.⁴⁷

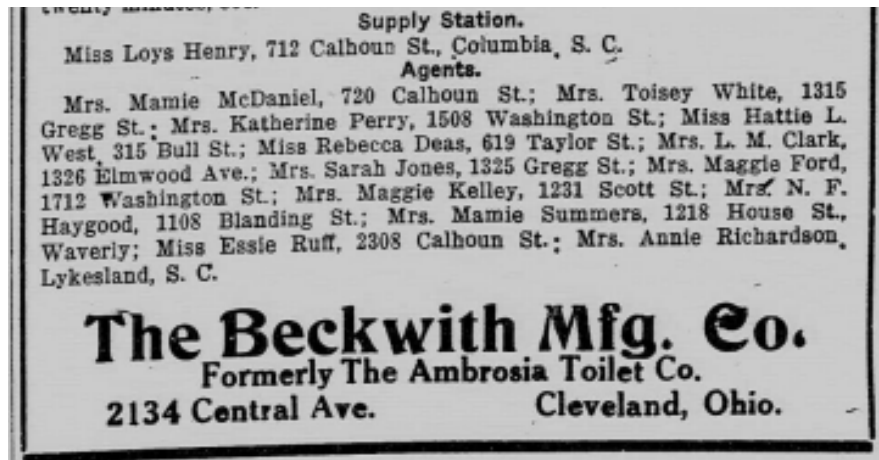


Figure 1.3: Madam Beckwith agents' names printed in the *Southern Indicator* (Columbia), 1921.

Although other women listed in the Beckwith advertisement were hidden behind their husband's occupations in the city directories, it is reasonable to believe these married women used beauty culture to help their families' economic situation, too. Sarah Jones was listed under her laborer husband at 1325 Gregg Street in 1922. Though her husband maintained his laborer position, in 1927 they had moved to a home in the growing black middle class area of Washington Street. Perhaps her salary from selling Beckwith products made the move possible for her family.⁴⁸ Single or married, becoming

⁴⁷ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 105.

⁴⁸ *Columbia City Directories*. 1917, 1922, 1927.

an agent for a company like Beckwith would present women with opportunities for financial independence domestic work never could.

Beckwith's advertisements across South Carolina newspapers from the 1920s to 1930s emphasized that beauty was not a luxury for black women, but a responsibility. The betterment of the race was dependent on African American women presenting themselves well. Above the list of Columbia's agents was a photograph of a refined woman looking demurely away from the reader and the text, "You have but one face. Why disfigure it with a cheap powder?"⁴⁹ Later Beckwith ads would picture a thoroughly modern flapper standing onstage and gesturing to a pyramid of the company's products.⁵⁰ Beckwith was a black-owned, northern company. In picturing modern, fashionable women in their southern newspaper ads, they contributed to a national New Negro Movement taking shape in northern cities after the First World War. As Alain Locke outlined in his 1925 anthology of the movement, African Americans were fighting to shed all remnants of the servile, shuffling "Old Negro" in advertisement, art, and thought. They wanted to replace racist imagery with the "New Negro"—independent, self-confident, and successful. Black women were encouraged to pursue education and refinement in the effort to represent the New Negro, but self-presentation was perhaps their key objective: to prove that "the intrinsic standard of Beauty does not rest in the white race."⁵¹

Replacing the Old Negro would prove difficult in South Carolina. Illustrations of distinguished African Americans and calls for beauty culture agents battled for

⁴⁹ Beckwith's "Refinol" advertisement, *Southern Indicator* (Columbia), September 3, 1921.

⁵⁰ Beckwith's Refinol advertisement. *Southern Indicator* (Columbia), August 12, 1922.

⁵¹ Alain Locke, "The Task of Negro Woman" in *The New Negro* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1925), 369-385.

newspaper space with racist portrayals of black womanhood. A Snowdrift Shortening advertisement in the *Union Times* pictured a plump, dark black woman labeled “Mammy Snow” by the stove. Instead of her hair neatly coiffed, she hid it up in a scarf—the style typical in slavery.⁵² Advertisements for minstrel shows also increased in South Carolina’s white newspapers from 1915 to 1925. A half-page portrayal of a famous white minstrel in blackface, Nick Glynne, appeared grinning in the *Abbeville Press & Banner* in 1917, and the *Herald and News* advertised an all-white touring minstrel company that would parade through the streets of Newberry.⁵³

It is just as important to note that white manufacturers continued making black cosmetic products despite the success of black-owned enterprises, and that these companies were the worst offenders in their racist advertisements. One advertisement for the white-made Exelento Quinine Pomade ran so frequently in Newberry’s *Herald and News* and was so racially charged that it warrants its own discussion. With the bold, capitalized headline “KINKY HAIR,” the ad featured a photograph of an unsmiling black woman. The ad’s copy displayed a strained attempt of a white company out of Georgia to capture the trustworthy tone of the advertisements black entrepreneurs like Madam C.J. Walker had produced. Its picture testimonial, accompanied by a grateful letter from the supposed user, showed a woman whose hair had indeed grown past her shoulders, just as the manufacturers promised. Aside from her hair, though, the model was slack-jawed and slumped over, almost as if she was unready for the photo to be taken; the company clearly had no interest in picturing the model as an elegant woman. With her lackluster

⁵² Snowdrift Shortening advertisement. *Union Times* (Union), February 2, 1912.

⁵³ “J.A. Coburn’s Greater Minstrels.” *The Herald and News* (Newberry), October 8, 1909. In Abbeville: “Funny Nicodemus.” *Abbeville Press and Banner*, October 26, 1917. See also: *The Intelligencer* (Anderson), August 25, 1915; *Abbeville Press and Banner*, January 5, 1920.

countenance and the bold derogatory tagline, “KINKY HAIR,” Exelento conveyed that while their products were effective in growing hair, they were not in the business of beautifying an inferior black race.⁵⁴

The leaders of the New Negro movement asked women to shake Old Negro portrayals like the Exelento model and Mammy Snow with careful attention to their appearance. Put simply, beauty was indeed power in the fight to reshape representations of African American identity. In September 1921, the national newspaper *Half-Century* announced a photo beauty contest in which South Carolinian women enthusiastically participated. Its goal was explicitly political: to show white people that “all beautiful hair is not straight, that all beautiful skin is not white, and that all beautiful contours are not possessed by white women.”⁵⁵ Contestants from Newberry, Columbia, and Charleston were among the young ladies featured in the competition. National photographic contests were relevant to the development of beauty culture in the state because they provided black women in South Carolina a platform to showcase their beauty that local black newspapers could never facilitate. By participating in contests that sought to define “the ideal type of Negro beauty,” South Carolinian women contributed to the urgent national effort to define the New Negro. The concept of the New Negro would evolve with the decades, and black women continued to use beauty culture as a weapon against racism well into the 1950s and 1960s.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ The frequency with which the Exelento “KINKY” advertisement appears in the *Herald and News* is jarring. At times, the ad used a different model, but still with the same racially-charged effect (see *Herald and News* May 26, 1916). The advertisement also appears frequently in another paper, the *Union Times*: eleven times in the summer of 1916 alone.

⁵⁵ “Who Is the Prettiest Colored Girl in the United States?” *Half Century*, September 1921. On Anthony Overton and his magazine, see Rooks, *Ladies’ Pages*, 108-11, and Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 109.

⁵⁶ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I A Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 35.

African Americans never stopped asking women to do important work on behalf of their race—and it *was* work. Only a few in the state managed to chip away at their expected domestic roles to become successful beauticians full-time, but their homes and salons were filled with women who sacrificed precious free time and funds in the name of beauty. The intricate hair pressing process women underwent for most of the twentieth century—cleansing and conditioning, oiling of the hair and scalp, and pulling the hair through the teeth of a steel comb heated over an open flame—was more torturous than indulgent. The “press and curl” that had become standard by the 1940s took at least two hours. For maids whose employers gave them perhaps only one day off each week, the regular investment in hair styling was significant.⁵⁷ Smooth hair was a requirement of black womanhood by mid-century, even throughout the Civil Rights battles of the 1960s; Vivian Malone, for instance, was advised to have her hair freshly pressed when she entered the University of Alabama as one of its two first black students.⁵⁸ Any of the older debates from leaders like Booker T. Washington about straightened hair undermining racial consciousness had long been silenced. Black females made room in their schedules and budgets to spend hours in the neighborhood salon regardless of their circumstances.

Despite the labor and time required to make it to the salon chair, the beauty parlor was also a place of rest for black female bodies exhausted from meeting the needs of white employers and then rushing home to care for their own families. Cozell Frazier described her beauty parlor in St. Helena, South Carolina as a place where her customers

⁵⁷ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 104.

⁵⁸ Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, “‘Dress modestly, neatly...as if you were going to church’: Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Early Civil Rights Movement,” in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter Ling and Sharon Monteith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 96.

“did not need to meet the demands of children or men.”⁵⁹ Their time in the beautician’s chair was the one hour some folks would spend “off their feet” for restful self-care, and the one time many of them felt heard. Beauticians became counselors who tended to more than just hair, recalled Margaret Williams Neal of the upstate. Their salons became sanctuaries against racial cruelties.⁶⁰ A beautician’s success depended on her ability to provide a comfort her customers would deem indispensable in their weekly routines. Beauty culture proved Depression-proof: the number of beauticians in the state kept climbing in the 1930s—even if some had to accept exchanges of food or other goods to press neighbors’ hair. By 1940, African Americans became the largest per capita consumers of cosmetic and hair preparations, and this growth continued throughout the Civil Rights movement.⁶¹

Annual publications of *Negro Motorist’s Green Book* shed light on how the beauty industry took shape in South Carolina’s cities leading up to the Civil Rights era. The *Green Book*, a national guide published each year, helped black travelers navigate accommodations, restaurants, and attractions during Jim Crow segregation. To counteract the risk of humiliation or violence at the hands of white business owners, the book contained lists of black-owned or black-receptive establishments by state. Originally, the *Green Book* only included lodging and dining in its lists. Interestingly enough, the first category to be added next to the essentials of boarding and food was “Beauty Parlors” in

⁵⁹ Cozell Frazier, interviewed by Tunga White, St. Helena, S.C., 7 August 1994, BTV.

⁶⁰ Margaret Williams Neal, interviewed by Leslie Brown, Charlotte, N.C. 7 June 1993, BTV.

⁶¹ Robert E. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 34.

1939.⁶² The addition speaks to the importance of the salon to African American women—that it might be considered as vital as a safe place to sleep and to eat. The *Green Book* is a useful resource for determining the long-term success of salons in the state. Columbia’s beauty parlors in 1939, Ruth’s at 1221 Pine Street and Madame Peter’s at 1906 Blanding Street, remained open for many years. The 1947 edition of the *Green Book* points to a larger change in the structure of Columbia: the blossoming of a thriving black business district in the downtown area. All three beauty parlors listed, Amy’s, Obbie’s, and Morgan’s, have their addresses on Washington Street. Drug stores, a black-owned movie theater, and department stores lined the street alongside them. The three salons retained prominent listing in the *Green Book* through 1955.

The state capital was not the only commercial landscape shaped by a ‘beauty boom’ in the postwar era. Generated by women’s new power as consumers during World War II, beauty parlors cropped up in expected hubs like Charleston and Greenville, as well as tiny towns like Cheraw and Mullins. The additional category of “Beauty Schools” appeared in the *Green Book* in 1948. There was a Poro School of Beauty Culture in Columbia that continued the legacy of Annie Malone, but there was also the individually-owned Madare Bradley downtown that remained open and successful until the 1960s.⁶³ Historically black colleges in the state declined to include beauty culture in their curriculums. Further upstate, a beauty school called Jefferson’s was established in Rock Hill—likely a product of Clinton College’s decision not to incorporate a beauty culture

⁶² Victor H. Green, *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (New York, 1939). Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research Division, New York Public Library Digital Collections.

⁶³ *Green Book*, “South Carolina,” 1948. Madare Bradley appears in the South Carolina section of the *Green Book* beginning in 1948 and retains a space until the book removed the “Beauty School” category.

program in its course offerings.⁶⁴ Clinton's legacy as a school established by the AME Zion Church during Reconstruction to instruct freedmen likely had something to do with the decision. Colleges like Clinton, which trained students to be educators and ministers, had difficulty recognizing beauty culturists as equal leaders in African American communities. Part of the reticence to recognize the field's legitimacy was inevitably gendered; although women who attended received instruction in mathematics and foreign languages, they were also expected to enroll in courses like home economics.⁶⁵ The beauty culture business, to Clinton and other HBCUs, did not mesh with their traditional vision of black female virtue.⁶⁶

Even if beauty culture did not make it onto college campuses, beauty shops and beauty schools in new black business districts, like the one gaining momentum in downtown Columbia in the 1940s, would have a tremendous impact on the Civil Rights movement to come. The salons on Harden and Washington Streets served both the neighborhood women of Waverly, a black suburb of the city, and college students from the Benedict and Allen campuses.⁶⁷ The intersection of older working women, homemakers, and co-eds in the beauty parlors would prove impactful as the Civil Rights movement progressed. College students vocal in the effort sat under dryers beside domestic workers and had an opportunity to discuss the problems facing Columbia's black residents. The at-home salons of the 1920s and 30s had provided a space away from whites, but stand-alone beauty parlors became a meeting ground for political action.

⁶⁴ *Green Book*, "South Carolina," 1948.

⁶⁵ For history on Clinton College as an HBCU, see Piper Peters Aheron, *Clinton Junior College* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia, 2004).

⁶⁶ Roberts explores HBCU's standards for black womanhood in *Pageants*, 180-186.

⁶⁷ Regina Koger Monteith. "Carver Theater, Columbia S.C." National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form, 2002.

Allen and Benedict students were engaged in a nationwide sit-in movement just down the block from the beauty shops on Washington Street. Simon Bouie was arrested after he sat at an Eckerd's Drug Store downtown in 1960. The same year, five students from Benedict and Allen again sat at a segregated lunch counter and requested service. Of hundreds of sit-in cases throughout the country, the Supreme Court heard seventeen; four of them were from South Carolina.⁶⁸ In another key case heard, from a Woolworth's in Mississippi, student activist Anne Moody left a sit-in sticky from the ketchup and slurs hurled at her. Interestingly enough, the first place she sought comfort was a beauty parlor a short walk down the street. There, she said, the women surrounded her with kind words of comfort while the beautician washed her hair and stockings. For Moody, as for so many African American women, the salon was a safe haven.⁶⁹

Some beauticians became the facilitators of activism. Bernice Robinson of Charleston believed it her responsibility to politically educate the black women who sat in her salon chair. She recognized that her economic self-sufficiency placed her in a unique position among African Americans; she had her own business supplied by black supply houses, and exclusively served black clients. She therefore had no fear of retaliation from a white employer.⁷⁰ Robinson would become crucial to the Civil Rights effort in the Low Country, eventually stepping out of her beauty shop and into the classroom as a trailblazer of the Citizenship School movement alongside her cousin, activist Septima Clark. The program's goal was to teach African American adults to read

⁶⁸ Monrad G. Paulsen, "The Sit-In Cases of 1964: 'But Answer Came There None,'" *The Supreme Court Review*, 1964, no. 1 (1964): 140-141.

⁶⁹ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. 1968. (Reprint, New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2004), 293.

⁷⁰ Bernice Robinson interviewed in Elliot Wigginton, *Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grassroots Social Activism in America, 1921-1964* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1991).

and write well enough to pass a citizenship test and vote. Johns Island would be the national test case. Clark believed beauticians, not schoolteachers, to be the ideal instructors for black adults who could not read or write. Schoolteachers were too far removed from the lives of illiterate Johns Island pupils, Clark argued, to be as effective in the movement. Beauticians, on the other hand, carried on conversations with working class folks every day. Because of Bernice Robinson's success in the pilot program, beauticians became the most heavily represented group among instructors of Citizenship Schools in the South.⁷¹

Bernice Robinson's life mirrors the story of so many black women in the South. She was frustrated with her work as a maid at a hunting resort on one of the Sea Islands and she wanted a better life for her young daughter. So, in 1936, she hopped on a train north to find work in a garment factory in New York City. Robinson was one six million African Americans to migrate out of southern states in hopes of escaping a fate of unfulfilling labor or violence.⁷² She was eventually called back home to Charleston to care for her sick mother. When she arrived, she built a salon out of her own bedroom. For Bernice Robinson and for others, beauty culture emerged as a welcome alternative to domestic work or migration. Her at-home salon would enable her to tend to her family while also making a comfortable living.

Perhaps the time up North emboldened Bernice Robinson. While she wielded her comb, the Robinson salon was a "center for all sorts of subversive activity." She opened her shop doors as a meeting place for activists to strategize voter registration drives and to distribute NAACP literature. Her beauty parlor was instrumental in getting NAACP

⁷¹ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 115.

⁷² Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 20.

membership in Charleston from three hundred in 1947 to over a thousand in 1951. “I would leave people under the dryer to take others down to the registration office to get them registered. I would say, ‘If you get too hot under there, just cut her off and come out!’” In 1955, in response to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the South Carolina legislature made it illegal for employees of the city and state to be members of the NAACP. So Bernice Robinson told her customers, many of whom were teachers, nurses, and maids, to have their NAACP membership materials sent to the salon to prevent the white mailman from reporting them to their employers.⁷³

The beauty parlor’s innocuous appearance worked to its advantage. It was the last place white Southerners would suspect to host what they perceived as subversive activities. When Otis Perkins reported for the *Charleston News and Courier* about the Citizenship Schools begun out of Bernice Robinson’s beauty shop, he was surprised to learn that they had been conducted for three years before whites in Charleston knew anything about them.⁷⁴ He was even more astonished that Bernice Robinson had helped to establish other offshoot “classrooms” in beauty shops throughout the Charleston area. Marylee Davis, a salon owner and activist in North Charleston, asked Robinson to help her teach twelve domestic workers in the evenings behind her doors. Davis cared deeply about the problems facing the primarily black North Charleston community, and wanted to empower women not just to vote but also to lobby local politicians for better schools and roads.⁷⁵

⁷³ Robinson, quoted in Wigginton, *Refuse to Stand Silently By*, 245.

⁷⁴ Sandra B. Oldendorf, “The South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools, 1957-1961” in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1990), 67.

⁷⁵ Katherine Mellen Charron, “Teaching Citizenship: Septima Poinsette Clark and the Transformation of the African American Freedom Struggle,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2005), 87.

The salon's political activities functioned right under white Southerners' noses and left politicians scratching their heads at elections, even at the national level. In 1964, Louis Martin sought to organize southern states to elect Lyndon Baines Johnson. Searching for a way to reach out to "rank-and-file" blacks without bribing local establishments for endorsements. He found the most effective form of outreach was leaving his pamphlets at neighborhood beauty parlors. The beauticians did not have to distribute the materials; but they were there, placed conveniently for women to pick up and browse while the dryers hummed in their ears. "The politicians couldn't figure out what happened... We got out a bigger vote in the states in which that operated."⁷⁶

Certainly not all beauticians were as subversive as Bernice Robinson, and not all salon proprietors felt comfortable distributing political materials. But those who did not engage in political activities still provided critical community spaces. In some small towns, the beauty parlor was the news center of the community; Bell's on Huger Street in tiny Cheraw, South Carolina had a television before most homes, which suddenly made trips to the salon with her mother more tolerable for Rosemary Spencer as a young girl.⁷⁷ The shops served as the meeting ground for African American women of all walks of life. Arguably, it was the only place ruled and used exclusively by black females. These women obviously were barred from official political bodies in the state due to their race. The church was a powerful institution in the African American community, but was male-led. Schools, as Septima Clark observed, could be alienating to the less educated

⁷⁶ Louis Martin interviewed by Michael L. Gillette. June 12 1986. LBJ Presidential Library.

⁷⁷ Rosemary Spencer, interviewed by Leslie Brown, Charlotte, N.C., 9 June 1993, BTV.

among black women. Beauty parlors, though, surrounded maids and the middle class alike with an environment in which they could learn from and lead one another.⁷⁸

Porro founder Annie Malone instructed her field agents to go out and “work on heads” in their communities.⁷⁹ The phrase Malone used from beauty culture’s beginning is perhaps the most apt description for what black women in South Carolina accomplished between 1900 and 1960. Beauticians changed more than just hair. When South Carolina’s African American women leapt at the opportunity to become Walker or Porro agents at the beginning of the twentieth century, they turned the market on its head. When they turned door-knocking sales into backroom beauty parlors, and home salons into successful businesses on downtown streets across the state, they challenged perceptions of black inferiority. When they used their salons’ four walls to shelter black women of all backgrounds, they instilled in their clients a sense of dignity. Through club work, Citizenship Schools and secret NAACP meetings, they changed minds.

Even now, the beautician seems the least likely adversary for Jim Crow. For decades the assumption was that smoother, straighter hair styles and lighter skin were an attempt to cover one’s blackness. Tracing the journey of South Carolina’s beauticians calls that into question. They entered beauty culture as washerwomen and maids, homemakers and teachers, but they all shared the belief that African American women could be beautiful, successful, and powerful in shaping their communities. In a state where racism was at its most fervent, the hours beauticians spent each day smoothing and styling hair provided women with armor against the indignities they might suffer as they emerged onto the streets. In “working on heads,” beauticians convinced African

⁷⁸ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 108.

⁷⁹ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 39.

American women of their own value. And although beauty culture remains a complicated history, historians can uncomplicate it by working through the tangles unique to each state and region.

SECTION 2: EXHIBIT PLAN FOR “SKIN DEEP”

African American Women and the Building of Beauty Culture in South Carolina



In the midst of Jim Crow racism, African American women in South Carolina built a beauty culture that empowered women to start businesses and reshape their worlds.

Summary

Skin Deep deconstructs the first-glance assumption that the popularity of skin bleaches and hair pressing in South Carolina meant white supremacy had triumphed in African American beauty standards. The exhibit tells a different story of black women crafting a prosperous beauty industry despite the bitter racism they faced in the state.

This project is designed to be a temporary exhibit in the Mann-Simons Site, under supervision of Historic Columbia. It centers on an artifact discovered at the Mann Simons property during excavation between 2005 and 2007: a small bottle of skin lightener, labeled “White Life”. The period of interest for the exhibit is between 1900-1960, with South Carolina in the grip of Jim Crow. Some scholars identify this time frame as the height of race anxieties, apparent in the concepts of “race suicide” and “passing” as whites sought to barricade black success. The White Life bottle at the center of the exhibit was used in the first decade of the 20th century, when the Mann-Simons family owned a lunch counter on the property.

The relationship between African American women and their cosmetic choices remains complicated. However, it is a history worth exploration in the Mann-Simons property because it is a story of black entrepreneurship and success against the steep odds of Jim Crow. Black females took control of the manufacture, marketing, and use of their own beauty products. They converted product formulas from harmful to healthy. They started businesses. They created key private spaces for African American women to discuss problems facing their race. *Skin Deep* aims to sensitively pry out how black women used these products to control their destiny.

In the exhibit, these sections explore African American women's battle for recognition:

- 1) "Skin Deep" serves as an entry panel and states the exhibit's big idea: "In the midst of Jim Crow racism, African American women in South Carolina built a beauty culture all their own."
- 2) "White Life" points to the discovery of a bottle of skin lightener during excavation of the Mann-Simons site and the white-controlled manufacturing of damaging cosmetic products for black women at the turn of the 20th century.
- 3) "Taking Charge" introduces the concept of beauty culture to combat those harmful white-made products. It highlights products South Carolinian women used as alternatives.
- 4) "Homegrown" roots the beauty culture industry within the home, where African American women of the state started their own businesses out of kitchens and back rooms.
- 5) An interactive table asks visitors to follow the recipe handwritten by Annie Malone in 1910 to make Poro Hair Grower.
- 6) "Places of Change" concludes the exhibit by emphasizing the power of private space for African American women: gathered around a kitchen chair pressing hair, and later in salons that would become places of political discussion.
- 7) "A Return to the White Life Bottle" places skin lightening and hair straightening in a global context.

Design Overview

Skin Deep will be housed in the northwest room of the Mann-Simons Site, a rectangular room in the rear of the cottage. Selecting this room for the exhibit will cause the least disturbance to regular tours and to artifacts currently in place.

It is important that the design of this temporary exhibit fit in with the themes of the Mann-Simons site as a whole. *Skin Deep*'s discussion of women's entrepreneurship amidst segregation matches the museum's mission "to explore how the histories and experiences of individuals are shaped and informed by larger political-economic, gender, race and class considerations."⁷⁴ The exhibit includes objects, hands-on interactives, and furniture to remain loyal to Mann-Simons' style as an updated house museum.

To reduce cost and impact on future exhibits, the exhibit will use a temporary text panel system that utilizes the structures of panels and lighting already in place in the NW room. A non-permanent adhesive used to wrap the new text sheets around the edges of the normal text panel structures will minimize any damage. Additionally, the exhibit will use the case currently in the NW room, rotating out the archeological artifacts currently on display and replacing them with those for *Skin Deep*.

⁷⁴ "Mann-Simons Site Overview," Historic Columbia, accessed Feb. 20, 2017. <http://www.historiccolumbia.org/properties-and-gardens/overview-2>.

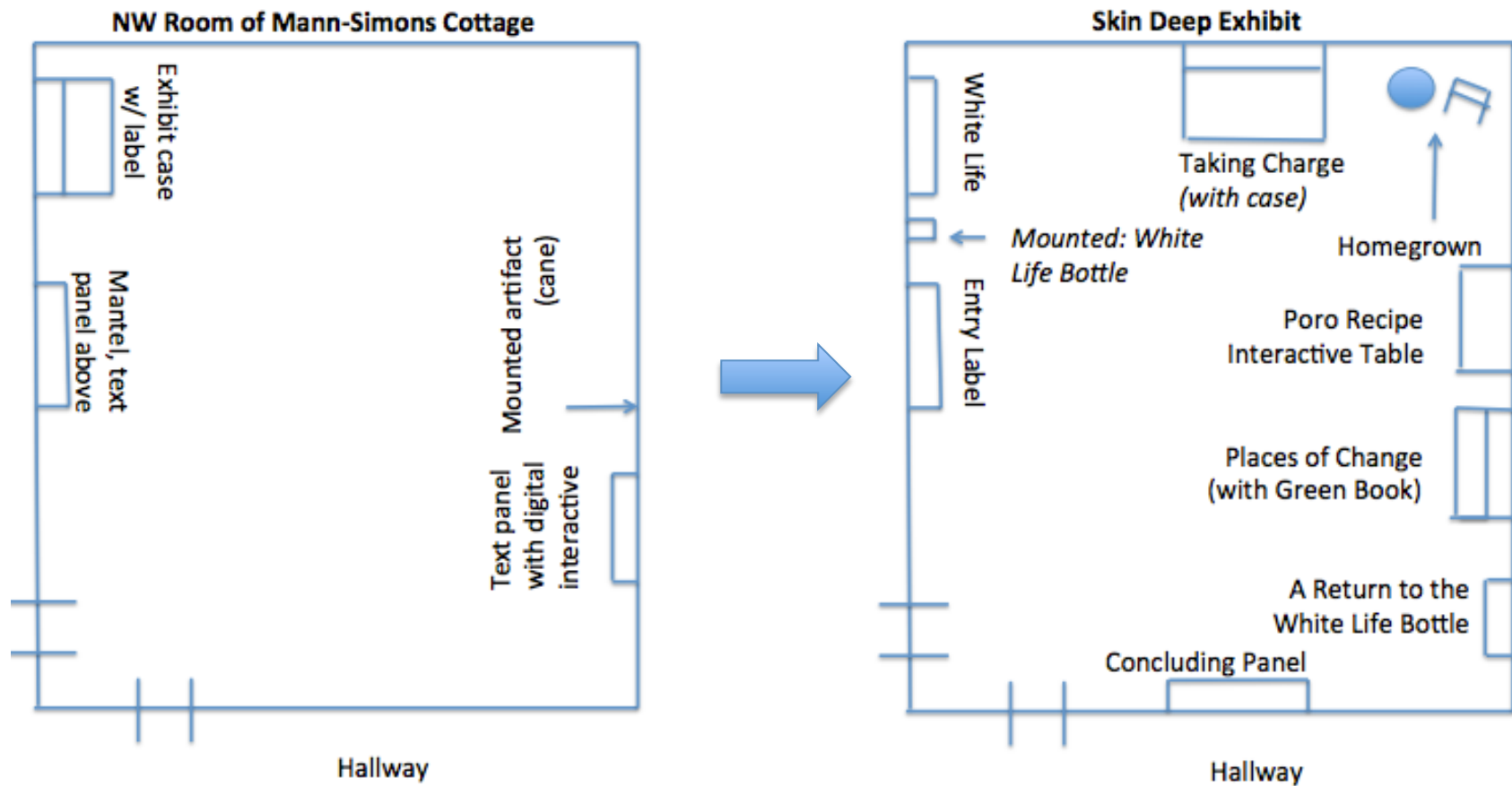


Figure 2.1: Exhibit floor plan. Seeking cost-efficiency and minimal intrusion, this temporary exhibit will make use of the existing text panels and cases in the northwest room of Mann-Simons.

OBJECT AND TEXT PANEL LIST



(1) ENTRY LABEL TEXT:

Skin Deep

In the midst of Jim Crow racism, African American women in South Carolina built a beauty culture that empowered women to start their own businesses and reshape their worlds.

Figure 2.2: Women gather at a beauty school in Columbia, 1954. (Possibly attributed to Madare Bradley on Hampton Street)



Figure 2.3: The White Life bottle found on the Mann-Simons property, dated between 1891-1909. (Historic Columbia)

(2) *(Mounted to wall)*

A Problematic Discovery

Among the archeological finds on the Mann-Simons property was this bottle of skin lightener, labeled “White Life”. The cosmetic product unearthed a history that is far from pretty.

Skin bleaches like White Life were used to chemically lighten skin. However, early formulations of these products were hazardous. They could cause complete destruction to the skin, or even blindness.

Archeologists dated the bottle between 1891-1909, when the Mann-Simons owned their lunch counter. It may have been sold in the shop or used by someone in the family.⁷⁵

As you walk through the exhibit, keep the White Life bottle in mind. Consider how African American beauty products change over the decades—and who changes them.

⁷⁵ Jakob D. Crockett, *History and Archaeology at the Mann-Simons Site* (Historic Columbia Foundation, 2012), 37.



Figure 2.4: Advertisement for Imperial Skin Lightener, 1919

(3) PANEL 2 TEXT:

“White Life”

After emancipation, white cosmetics manufacturers saw an opportunity to market products to newly freed African Americans.

Skin lighteners gained popularity in the early 1900s. By 1930, there were 232 brands on the market.⁷⁶

The advertisements white companies produced demeaned black features and presumed that black women longed to be white—like this 1900 ad for “Black Skin Remover” in Charleston’s *Afro-American Citizen*.

White manufacturers’ notions proved out of touch with black women’s actual desires at the turn of the 20th century.

⁷⁶ Shirley Anne Tate, *Skin Bleaching in Black Atlantic Zones: Shade Shifters* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 32.

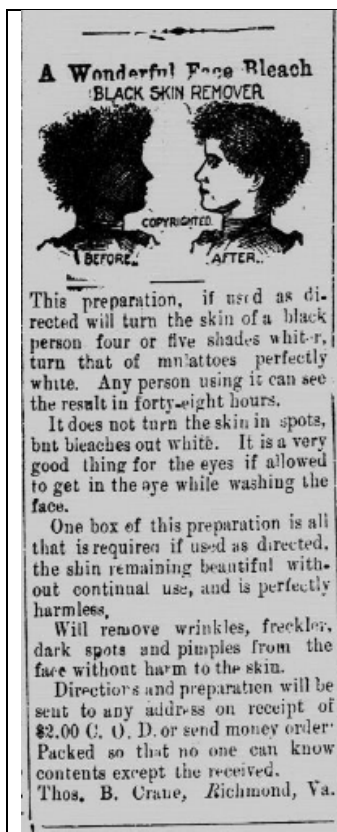


Figure 2.5: “A Wonderful Face Bleach,” manufactured by the white Thomas Crane Co. and advertised in Columbia’s *Afro-American Citizen*, 1900.

(PANEL 2 CONT.)

Take a look at this 1900 ad for “Black Skin Remover” in Charleston’s *Afro-American Citizen*.

What do the pictures and the language suggest about how African American women should want to look?



Figure 2.6: Madam C.J. Walker challenged white cosmetics manufacturers and started a door-to-door revolution in natural beauty products.



Figure 2.7: Annie Turnbo Malone founded colleges to train women in her Poro hair system, sending hundreds of beauticians to start working on hair in South Carolina.

(4) PANEL 3 TEXT:

Taking Charge

The beauty products white-owned companies manufactured were dangerous. African American women reported permanent burns to their skin, and even instances of blindness. Some black women wondered if the harm to their skin was intentional.

African American women decided to take charge of their own cosmetic manufacturing. Annie Turnbo Malone and Madam C.J. Walker created mail-order skin and hair systems made from natural ingredients. When Walker visited Columbia to share her system in 1913, the *Southern Indicator* hailed her as the “hair miracle-worker.”

Instead of wanting to look “more white,” Malone and Walker insisted that African American women were crafting their own unique **beauty culture** through the use and marketing of these products.



PANEL 3 OBJECT CASE

Figure 2.8: Poro Hot Comb, c. 1900

Annie Malone's Poro System hot comb was patented in 1900. When heated over the stove, the comb would press hair straight. (*Found in rural upstate South Carolina. Auction.*)

Figure 2.9: Walker Hot Comb, 1921

Madam C.J. Walker, Malone's student, improved on the comb's design by adding a curling chamber to stay truer to the natural texture of African American hair. (*Chudnow Museum, Wisconsin*)

Figure 2.10: Poro Pressing Oil, c. 1910

Smoothing hair required a lot more than a hot comb. A whole host of products were necessary to condition and protect from damage. (*online auction*)



Figure 2.11: *Passing* by Nella Larsen, 1929. Some black leaders worried that hair pressing and skin lightening products encouraged black women to shed their own race. Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen tapped into this concern, penning a popular novella about a young light-skinned woman “passing” as white. Madam C.J. Walker herself refused to market skin bleaches while she was alive.⁷⁷ (1929 edition online auction)



Figure 2.12: Kitchen chair and table, c. 1920s.
*(Historic Columbia has period appropriate
furniture in its collections)*

MOUNTED LABEL TEXT:

Homegrown

Armed with these products and their training certificates, African American women in South Carolina built businesses—many times out of their own homes. In the 1920s, Columbia's City Directories increasingly list African American women as proprietors of their own salons.

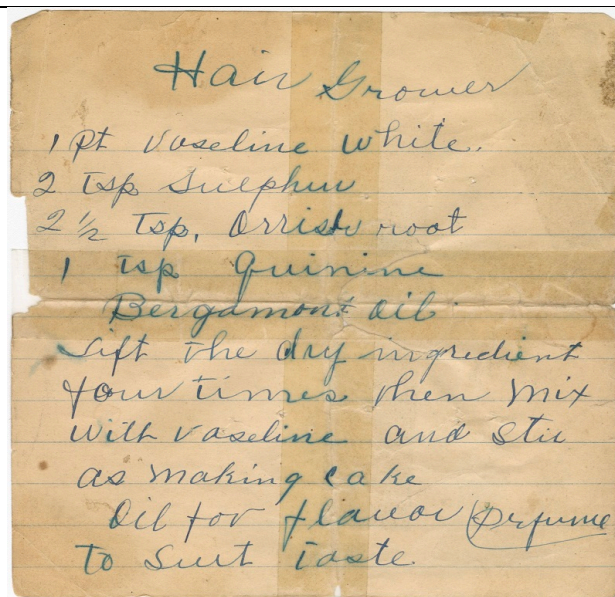


Figure 2.13: Poro Recipe (*Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture*, 2011.170)

8 Objects - Ingredients for Hair Grower

- Vaseline
- sulphur
- orrish root
- quinine
- bergamot oil
- sifter, measuring cups and spoons

MOUNTED TO WALL: Poro Recipe

LABEL TEXT:

Handwritten Recipe for Poro Hair Grower, c. 1910.

Annie Malone used simple ingredients in her products instead of harmful chemicals.

How many of these ingredients do you think you could find in your medicine cabinet today?

INTERACTIVE:

LABEL TEXT:

Make Annie Malone's Hair Grower
Follow Annie Malone's recipe from 1910 and use the ingredients to recreate the original Poro Hair Grower.



Figure 2.14: A salon in Greenville, SC. Courtesy of NMAAH.



Figure 2.15: Bernice Robinson (far left) and Septima Clark train South Carolina teachers for their Citizenship Schools. Self-employed beauticians were active participants in the movement.¹ (*Wisconsin Historical Society*)

(14) PANEL 4 TEXT:

Places of Change

Beauty culture offered black women financial and social freedom that domestic work did not during Jim Crow segregation.

Backroom beauty parlors evolved into full-blown storefronts. The salon became a private space for black women to discuss more than just hair. Under the dryers, they would talk politics.

In the Civil Rights era, **Bernice Robinson**'s salon in Charleston became a place of political activism. Robinson's voter registration drives in her beauty shop raised NAACP membership in Charleston from 300 to 1,000 in 1951.⁷⁸ Alongside other beauticians and her cousin Septima Clark, Robinson created Citizenship Schools for African Americans in the state.

Those Citizenship Schools met in secret, in the place white Charlestonians least expected—beauty parlors.



Figure 2.16: The Negro Motorist Green Book, 1950.

(15) GREEN BOOK LABEL TEXT:

The Negro Motorist Green Book, 1950. (Online auction)
Published annually from 1936-1964, the *Negro Motorist Green Book* provided African Americans with lists of safe businesses during segregation.

Beauty salons were crucial to black travelers—the “Beauty Parlor” category was the first to be listed aside from necessities like food and lodging in 1939.

This *Green Book* from 1950 lists black-owned beauty parlors in Columbia.

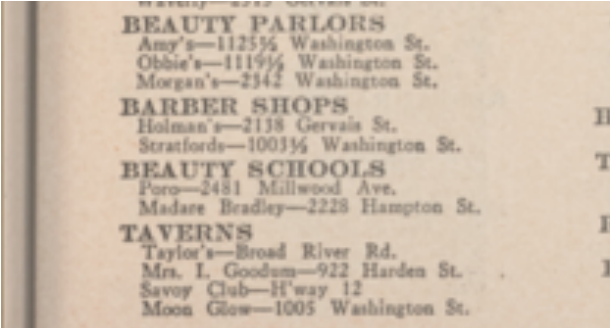
	<p>(15) GREEN BOOK LABEL CONTINUED</p> <p><i>You can see all three beauty parlors have addresses on Washington Street. What clues can this give us about the black business district in Columbia?</i></p> <p>Beauty parlors brought professional women into a growing black business area in Columbia’s downtown. Their location—between the African American suburb of Waverly and Benedict and Allen Universities made the salons a meeting ground for women of all backgrounds: from student activists and teachers to maids and housewives.⁷⁹</p> <p>⁷⁹ Paul Frederick Seman, “Structure and Spatial Distribution of Black Owned Businesses in Columbia, South Carolina: 1906 to 1976,” unpublished M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1977, studies the black business district in the Washington-Assembly Street area.</p>
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Figure 2.18: Othine Skin Bleach – Abu Dhabi



Figure 2.19: L'Oreal Garnier Men Power Light Face Wash - Indiaf

(16) OBJECT TABLE TEXT:

A Return the White Life Bottle

There is an international obsession with lighter skin.

These three products—from Abu Dhabi, India, and West Africa—claim to drastically lighten skin. Their advertisements connect success and romance with light skin.

All three also contain dangerous chemicals like hydroquinone, powerful steroids, and mercury. They have been criticized, yet they remain popular.⁸⁰



Figure 2.20: Bio Claire Lightening Body Cream – West Africa

(16) OBJECT TABLE TEXT CONTINUED

FLIP LABELS:

Open the flap to see the ingredients that go into these modern skin-lightening products.

- Othine Skin Bleach
Hydroquinone
Side effect: Blue-black darkening of skin
- Bio Claire Lightening Body Cream
Powerful steroid Clobetasol Propionate
Side effect: Skin burns, peeling, birth defects in pregnant women
- L’Oreal Garnier Men Power Light Face Wash
234.9 ppb (parts per billion) of mercury⁸¹
Side effect: Permanent kidney and skin damage

⁸⁰ Margaret Hunter, “The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality,” *Sociology Compass*, vol. 1 (2007): 248.

⁸¹ Tabassum Barnagarwala, “Food and Drug Administration: Mercury Found in L’Oreal Second Round of Testing,” *Indian Express* (Mumbai), Oct. 7, 2016.



Figure 2.21: Controversial “White Makes You Win” advertisement, Thailand 2016.



Figure 2.22: “Fair & Lovely” billboard, Mumbai, India.

(17) TEXT PANEL 5 (With images above Object Table)

Americans are primary consumers of foreign skin lighteners.⁸²

Even products banned overseas are easily attainable through online sources—a quick search engine enquiry away.

Advertisements for them tap into hopes that lighter skin will lead to better opportunities in life. They often present darker skin as a barrier to success, like a controversial Thai television ad simply stated in 2016: “White makes you win.”



Figure 2.23: “Femme Libre” billboard, Cote d’Ivoire.

(17) TEXT PANEL 5 CONTINUED

Compare these international advertisements to the “Black Skin Remover” ad behind you. What similarities do you see?



Figure 2.24: Madam C.J. Walker's company grew into an international industry. Advertisement from the *Crisis*, 1919.

(18) TEXT PANEL 6

What happened to the messages of empowerment black beauty culture sent out before 1960?

Early black beauty culturists like Madam C.J. Walker and Annie Malone wanted to give African American women pride in their race—through their appearance and through professional opportunities.

When beauty became a mass industry instead of a business commanded by women, advertising messages reverted to the often-racist imagery of the early 1900s.

It will take a global push from people of all colors to change the beauty dialogue back to one of empowerment.

TEXT PANEL 6 CONTINUED

This movement has begun in the United States and abroad. In Thailand, the controversial “White Makes You Win” commercial generated international outrage and was removed from the airwaves.⁸³ Americans have called for a more equal representation of non-white races in film, children’s toys, and beauty campaigns.

Malone and Walker trained agents to return to their communities in South Carolina and throughout the world to “work on heads” in their communities.⁸⁴ Beauticians in the state changed more than hair or faces; they changed minds. Can we change the beauty conversation?

⁸³ Wilfred Chan, “Thai Beauty Ad: Just Being White, You Will Win,” *CNN*, January 8, 2016.

⁸⁴ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 39

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